

When Dad's at sea at the time of birth

When Dad's at sea at the time of birth or for a good part of baby's first year, special efforts need to be made to capture and share the events that occur during these important days.

The birth of a baby is a profound experience for all parents. But when parents are apart at the time of birth, both mother and father should consider the feelings each may be experiencing. It is important to communicate often during this period to:

- Share the birth experience
- Share feelings about accepting the new role of parenthood
- Share information about the baby's growth and development
- Prepare for "family life"
- Reaffirm your commitment to one another

HOW MIGHT DAD BE FEELING?

Dads who are absent during the baby's first year experience many different emotions:

THE FIRST BLUSH OF PRIDE:

Most dads are proud and happy to announce the birth of their child to family and friends. It is also a time for passing out cigars, congratulations, and relief.

APPREHENSION:

Fatherhood is a serious responsibility. Many new fathers are anxious as they approach the new roles, demands, and challenges that lie ahead. Encouragement from others is helpful.

GUILT AND ANGER:

Both of these feelings gnaw at many new fathers who are separated from their wives and new babies. But what all new parents must do when they are apart at the time of birth is to accept the fact of separation and share as much of the new and exciting

parenting experiences as possible through frequent communication.

CURIOSITY:

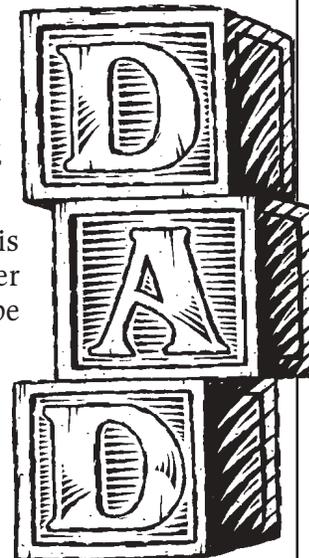
Every father wants to know about his baby's looks, likes, size, and abilities. During times of deployment, pictures, videotapes, and descriptions are a warm and welcomed opportunity for dad to get to know the newest family member.

CONCERN ABOUT FAMILY'S CARE:

Each new father wants to be assured that mother and baby are both safe and well cared for. Planning ahead to ensure that someone will be able to help mom and baby during his absence (family, friends, neighbors) will go a long way toward reducing worry. The command ombudsman may be an additional source for information and referrals.

JEALOUSY:

It is not uncommon for new fathers to feel a bit jealous of the amount of attention that is now focused on the baby. It is important to remember that infant needs must be met first and that adults, because they are mature and capable, will usually need to wait for their needs to be met. If parents share the household duties and care of the baby, they will have more time for one another and others.



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HOW MIGHT MOM BE FEELING?

Moms share many of the same feelings. They also experience these:

EXHAUSTION:

Most new mothers are surprised at how tired they get caring for an infant 24 hours a day. A father needs to understand how draining this is for a new mom. When he comes home, his help with the baby is vital to strengthening the relationship, the family, and her physical abilities. Parents need to give each other their active support, recognition, and encouragement every day.

FULFILLMENT AND EXCITEMENT:

Many new mothers feel fulfilled and excited following childbirth. They enjoy touching, holding, and cuddling their new babies. A very special love develops between the two of them as they get to know and love each other. A father who is away at the time of birth can also develop this special love for the baby when he returns from sea.

PRESSURE OR DEPRESSION:

It is not uncommon for a new mother to experience post-partum depression or what many people call "baby blues." New mothers go through very noticeable physical and emotional changes during pregnancy and childbirth. Some mothers feel overwhelmed

with the changes in their bodies and with their baby's demands. New moms need help and understanding during the first few months to make the needed adjustments. Phone calls, email, and letters of encouragement stating how much the father values what mom is doing for the baby will help greatly.

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE:

New mothers have lots of time to learn about parenting and child care because they are usually the primary care givers. They learn about babies by trial and error, by reading, by talking to other good parents, and by visiting the doctor. Fathers can also learn by these methods

and are encouraged to join their wives in attending parenting classes sponsored by Fleet and Family Support Centers and other agencies. When moms and dads become knowledgeable and self-assured, marriages and family life are strengthened.

CAPTURING THE FEELINGS

There are many ways a new mother can help a father get to know and love his new baby.

- Send email and letters often describing the baby's looks, likes, personality, abilities, and growth.
- Send tapes of the baby's sounds and mother's soothing voice.
- Send pictures and videotapes of the baby.
- Send the baby's footprints, a lock of hair, booties, a hat, or some other things belonging to the baby.
- Write letters from the baby as if the baby were talking to dad.
- Keep a diary to share with dad.

COMING HOME AGAIN

Life together will be very different once the baby has arrived. Talk about sharing the joys as well as the responsibilities of parenthood. Be sure private time is spent together as a couple.

Dad needs to remember how mom described the baby and the baby's abilities. Try to be realistic about expectations of the baby and this new change in your life.

It is important for dad to ease back into the family gently by taking cues from mom. A very young baby needs lots of cuddling, skin contact, and time to study the eyes and face. An older baby (7 months plus) may view dad as a stranger and may require more time to accept him.

Expect dad to do things differently from mom. Dad's ways, as long as they are safe (no rough handling), will complement mom's ways and probably will delight the baby. Coming home to a new baby isn't always easy for fathers. But dad will be able to "catch up" and establish a warm and loving relationship with baby if he is persistent, observant, and patient.

